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AUTHOR Kowalski, Theodore J.
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ABSTRACT

A survey of key educational leaders at the state level revealed strong support for most of the recommendations advocated by national reports such as "A Nation at Risk." Surveys went to school board leadership, executive directors of state associations for administrators, state affiliates of teacher organizations, and state superintendents in each of the 50 states. Responses were sought on 41 recommendations which had recurring emphasis in the national reports. A list is provided of the recommendations and the percentages of respondents' agreement or disagreement. Six received very strong support, 30 received majority support (support not as definate as the "strong agreement" category), and five were not supported by a majority. A brief summary of the findings concludes that recommendations from national reports will result in substantial changes in the public schools. (JD)

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WILL NATIONAL REPORTS CHANGE PUBLIC EDUCATION?

by

Theodore J. Kowalski
Dean
Teachers College
Ball State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Will national reports such as A Nation at Risk result in substantive changes in our public schools? The results of a recent study would indicate that the answer is "yes." A survey of key educational leaders at the state level revealed strong support for most of the recommendations advocated by these national reports, including support from state executive directors of school boards associations.

In addition to school board leadership, the surveys were mailed to executive directors of state associations for administrators (superintendents, secondary principals, and elementary principals), teachers (NEA and AFT state affiliates), and the state superintendents in each of the fifty states. Overall, 54% of the surveys were returned, with a 58% return rate for the school board leaders. The survey included forty-one recommendations which had recurring emphasis in the national reports. The responders were asked to indicate if they "strongly agreed," "agreed," "disagreed," or "strongly disagreed" with the recommendations.

Strong Agreement

Six recommendations received very strong support from the state-level school board leadership. They included the following:

1. Instruction in effective study and work skills should be provided in the early grades.
2. Administrative burdens on the teacher and related intrusions into the school day should be reduced to add time for teaching and learning.
3. Teacher salaries should be performance based. (Eighty-four percent of the NEA responders and 75% of the AFT responders disagreed or strongly disagreed.)

4. Important personnel decisions (promotion, tenure, retention) should be based upon effective evaluation, including peer review.
5. School boards, administrators, and teachers should cooperate to develop career ladders.
6. Four years of English should be required for a high school diploma.

Obviously, teacher union leadership disagree with salaries being performance based. Their responses to this item were significantly different from the other groups. The other five items in this category received support from all the groups.

Agreement

Items listed in this category received majority support from the school board leaders; however, the support was not as definite as the "Strong Agreement" category. The vast majority of the 41 recommendations are in this category. They include the following:

1. Students in high school should be assigned more homework.
2. The burden on teachers for maintaining discipline should be reduced through the development of firm and fair codes of student conduct that are enforced consistently by school administration.
3. Attendance policies with clear incentives and sanctions should be used to reduce student absenteeism, tardiness, and dropping out.
4. Placement, grouping, and promotion policies should be guided by student mastery of subject matter and not age.
5. State-administered competency tests should be a condition of certification/licensure for educators.

6. Salaries for the teaching profession should be increased significantly.
7. Salaries should be performance based. (Eighty-four percent of NEA and 75% of AFT responders disagreed or strongly disagreed.)
8. School boards should extend contracts for teachers to allow for curriculum and professional development, programs for students with special needs, and a more adequate level of compensation during the summer months.
9. Individuals with mathematics and science degrees should be allowed to teach without formal credentials in teaching until shortages in these areas are removed. (One hundred percent of NEA responders, 94% of AFT responders, 60% of secondary principal responders, and 64% of elementary principal responders disagreed or strongly disagreed.)
10. Incentives, such as grants and loans, should be made available to attract outstanding students to the teaching profession, particularly in those areas of critical shortage.
11. Master teachers should be involved in designing teacher preparation programs conducted by departments, schools, and colleges of education.
12. Master teachers should be assigned to supervise the work of probationary teachers.
13. Financing in-service for teachers should be the primary function of the State rather than local school districts. (Note: School board responders were almost evenly divided on this issue: 52% for; 48% against.)

14. States should establish a School-College Coordination Panel to define minimum requirements for a smooth transition from high school to higher education.
15. Every high school should provide arrangements which permit students to accelerate academic programs.
16. Business should provide help for disadvantaged students via volunteer tutorial and family counseling services.
17. Business should support special school and part-time apprenticeship experience for high-risk students.
18. Business should provide enrichment programs for gifted students.
19. Corporate grants should provide sabbaticals to outstanding principals and a discretionary fund for principals to work with teachers in creative programs. (Fifty-two percent of NEA responders and 53% of AFT responders disagreed or strongly disagreed.)
20. Business should sponsor a facilities and equipment program to help schools improve their physical plant and science labs.
21. Require three years of mathematics for a high school diploma.
22. Require three years of science for a high school diploma.
23. Require three years of social studies for a high school diploma.
24. Require one semester of computer science for a high school diploma.
25. Require one semester of non-Western studies for a high school diploma.

26. The basics should be included in a two-year CORE curriculum, and the last two years of high school should include elective clusters resulting in transition from school to college work.
27. One unit of high school work should be added to help all students meet their social and civic obligations (e.g., opportunities should be made available for students to participate in their communities).
28. Schools, colleges, and universities should adopt more rigorous standards and higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct.
29. Grades in high school should be indicators of academic achievement so they can be relied on as evidence of a student's readiness for further study. Thus, grades should be based solely upon academic achievement.
30. Standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another in order to certify students' credentials and to design programs of remediation and enrichment.

The majority of responses for school board representatives were congruent with the responses for other groups except where a notation was made following the item.

Disagreement

Five recommendations were not supported by a majority of the state executives of school boards associations. These five were:

1. The school day should be lengthened.
2. The school year should be lengthened. (Fifty-six percent of the state superintendents agreed or strongly agreed with this recommendation.)
3. The special needs of slow learners and the gifted should be met outside the function of the "regular" classroom. (Eighty-one percent of the AFT responders, 50% of the NEA responders, 55% of the superintendent associations responders, and 65% of the secondary principal responders agreed or strongly agreed with this item.)
4. Business should provide cash awards for outstanding teachers. (Fifty percent of the state superintendents, 54% of the superintendent associations responders, and 64% of the high school principal responders agreed or strongly agreed with this recommendation.)
5. Two years of foreign language should be required for a high school diploma. (Seventy-four percent of the NEA responders and 62% of the AFT responders agreed or strongly agreed with this recommendation.)

The overall responses for representatives of school boards did differ from responses in other groups for three of the five recommendations. These differences are noted after each recommendation.

Summary

Assuming that state leadership in organizations and the state superintendent of public instruction have impact upon legislation and policy, their support for recommendations in the national reports on education would indicate that the reports will produce some change. The representatives of

school boards associations participating in this study supported 36 of 41 recommendations. For the most part, their support was congruent with support expressed by like representatives from other educational organizations and the state superintendents.

It is noteworthy that two recommendations which received little support, lengthening the school day and lengthening the school year, are receiving considerable attention in state legislatures. This appears to be one area where educators and the general public disagree.

Additionally, the controversial issue of allowing non-credentialed college graduates in mathematics and science to teach produced interesting results. Those closest to classroom instruction, i.e., the teachers and principals, reject this idea. Superintendents and school board representatives tend to support this recommendation, although not by an overwhelming margin.

The wide base of support for the 41 recommendations was somewhat surprising. One might have expected stronger differences between teacher union representatives and school board/management representatives. Perhaps public opinion in the aftermath of these national reports has affected the thinking of all state leaders in public education.